NEWS LESSON

The Side-Hustle Trap: What the Videos Leave Out



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What makes an online money-making promise sound believable?
2. Would you rather earn extra money from a hobby or keep it just for fun?
3. What would you ask someone who claimed their business ran itself?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**squeezed**	☐	A	money you get back from something you paid for
2	**legitimate**	☐	B	the people who watch, read or follow what you make
3	**profitable**	☐	C	a careful search to find out the facts
4	**audience**	☐	D	put under pressure because you have too little money
5	**initial**	☐	E	honest and allowed by the law
6	**respondents**	☐	F	happening at the beginning
7	**investigation**	☐	G	people who answer questions in a survey
8	**returns**	☐	H	making more money than it costs

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

The video opens with coffee and a payment notification. It rarely shows the months of unpaid work, or the thousands of people selling the same thing.

1 The video begins with coffee and a payment notification. Its creator says a small online business covers the bills while leaving plenty of time for family, travel and sleep. What the camera does not show is the crowded marketplace, the advertising costs or the weeks when nobody buys anything. For anyone squeezed by the cost of living, the promise is powerful. The missing work is exactly what deserves attention.

2 A side hustle is simply an activity that brings in income alongside a job or studies. Some people tutor languages, repair bicycles or walk dogs. Others sell digital products, run small online shops or earn commissions by recommending products. These can be legitimate businesses. Yet there is a growing industry built around the promise of passive income, money that supposedly keeps coming in after the initial work has been done. The trouble is that setting something up is rarely the same as making it profitable.

3 The difference between ambition and earnings is clear in recent research. Save the Student's 2026 survey found that 29% of respondents had a side hustle or business. Of those, 79% had made less than £500 over the previous year. Other surveys produce different figures because they question different groups and define side hustles differently. Even so, the evidence suggests that spectacular earnings are far from typical. Small amounts of extra money can make a genuine difference, but that is not the same as being able to quit your job.

4 Consider digital products such as online invitations or printable planners. There is no warehouse to rent, and the same file can be sold more than once. But the costs are real: crowded marketplaces, software subscriptions, listing fees and hours spent promoting products. Affiliate marketing is different. A company pays you a commission when a reader buys something using your link, but first you need people to trust your recommendations. Building an audience is often the hardest part of the job. Earnings are the money that comes in. Profit is what remains after costs, and many beginners forget the difference.

5 Perhaps the most awkward question concerns the influencers themselves. If a particular online business is so profitable, why do so many people spend their time selling courses about how to start one? Some are experienced entrepreneurs who offer valuable advice. Others appear to earn more from hopeful beginners than from the businesses they are recommending. In a recent Guardian investigation, a journalist tested several popular online money-making methods and found that the costs and effort quickly undermined the promise of easy profits.

6 It would be a mistake to dismiss side hustles altogether. They can provide flexibility, teach commercial skills and give people more control over their income. But a healthy dose of scepticism is useful when an opportunity promises big returns for little work. Before paying for software or a training course, calculate the likely costs, research your competitors and work out where your customers would come from. Financial independence may begin with a good idea, but it rarely begins with doing nothing.

Sources: The Guardian. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. All surveys of side hustles produce the same figures. T F NG
2. The writer says that building an audience is easy. T F NG
3. A journalist from the Guardian tried out several popular online money-making methods. T F NG
4. Most side hustles fail within the first year. T F NG
5. Roughly four in five of those with a side hustle made under £500 in a year. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

ambition **awkward** **commission** **competitors** **scepticism** **spectacular** **subscriptions** **undermined**

1. Online claims of effortless riches were met with _____ by many readers.
2. Monthly payments for software, known as _____ , can quietly reduce a seller's earnings.
3. Before launching an online shop, find out what your _____ charge for similar products.
4. Affiliate marketers earn a _____ of ten per cent each time someone buys through their link.
5. Several bad reviews _____ her confidence in the new shop.
6. A few influencers post _____ results, but their experience is far from typical.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time she saw her first sale, she _____ three months designing her products. (SPEND)
2. Most of these courses _____ on social media every day. (PROMOTE)
3. If you _____ the market first, you could lose money. (NOT RESEARCH)
4. She _____ on the shop for six months and has only made £80. (WORK)
5. Nobody _____ anything from the shop last week, so she changed her photos. (BUY)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some phrasal verbs take an object (turn down an offer). Think about the tense, because the verb must fit the sentence.

build	came	end	hold	rule	stand	turned

1. Many beginners _____ up spending more on software than they earn.
2. She _____ down the offer of a paid course because the price was too high.
3. It takes months to _____ up an audience that trusts your recommendations.
4. While scrolling late at night, he _____ across a video promising easy money.
5. Careful research may _____ out ideas that would never make money.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. Which part of an online success story would you most want to see?
2. When does useful advice become a sales pitch?
3. Could turning a hobby into a business change how you feel about it?

9 Role-play: should we buy the course?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the excited friend

You've seen an online course that costs £300 and promises money while you sleep. You want your friend to join you. Explain why it looks like a good chance and answer your friend's worries.

Student B · the cautious friend

You're not sure the course is worth £300. Ask at least two questions about the costs, the customers and who is really making money. Suggest a cheaper way to test the idea.

Useful phrases

I've just seen a course that teaches you to earn money online.

That's a lot of money for something we can't try first.

Who's actually making money from it?

I'd feel better if we checked the reviews together.

What would you do if it didn't work?

Let's find a compromise.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you buy the course, and what made you decide?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 D · 2 E · 3 H · 4 B · 5 F · 6 G · 7 C · 8 A

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 F · 3 T · 4 NG · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 scepticism · 2 subscriptions · 3 competitors · 4 commission · 5 undermined · 6 spectacular

6 Verb forms

1 had spent · 2 are promoted · 3 don't research or do not research · 4 has worked or has been working · 5 bought

7 Language focus

1 end · 2 turned · 3 build · 4 came · 5 rule

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